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¶1. (C) Summary. France sees Syria as a conduit for passing messages to the obstinate regime in Tehran and it believes that Syria is the only country Iran trusts, according to French MFA Middle East DAS Ludovic Pouille. Through its rapprochement, Pouille explained August 20, the Government of France (GOF) hopes to pry Syria away from Iran and help bring Damascus back to a closer relationship with the rest of the Arab world. The GOF also sees Syria as playing a constructive role in Lebanon, Pouille claimed, and he cautioned the USG and European Union (EU) not to make negative statements about March 8 that could be twisted and used against March 14. More broadly, Pouille said that France is the only EU member actively pursuing peace in the Middle East, and it would like the EU to demand additional steps from the Palestinians. Pouille indicated that the GOF will continue to push its plans for a Middle East peace summit and for additional high-level meetings with the USG. Pouille was quick to point out the GOF's activist posture in the Middle East and portrayed France as a leader in solving the region's problems. End Summary.

SYRIA: SARKOZY'S PLAN

¶2. (S) Pouille said the GOF sees Syria as an important regional player that can help pass messages from France and other countries to Iran that they could not otherwise deliver. He felt Syria had the distinction of being the only country that Iran trusted. He reported that Syria had played an important role in the release of French citizen Clotilda Reiss from prison in Iran, but added that the lobbying efforts for her release from other countries were also helpful (reftel). Pouille said "Sarkozy's Plan" for Syrian rapprochement was to 1) distance Syria from Iran to help reintegrate it into more normal relations with the rest of the Arab world, and 2) to use Syria to pass messages to Iran. Pouille felt Iran had the upper hand in its relationship with Syria, but Syrian President Assad was trying to change this, as evidenced by his reaching out to Saudi Arabia. The GOF wants to reward and encourage this behavior by Syria. France does not want to threaten Al Assad in any way because it does not want to see a militant regime replace him, Pouille explained.

LEBANON

¶3. (C) The GOF is very disappointed in Michel Aoun's obstructionist behavior, and Pouille referred to him three times as a "puppet of Hizbollah." Still, he said the GOF is largely staying out of the political impasse in Lebanon, which he described as "worrying, but not a crisis." Later, Pouille added that France would continue to send messages to key Lebanese parties through Syria, Turkey and other countries. However, he added that he doubted Lebanon could

form a government before the end of Ramadan and if President Sleiman goes to the United Nations General Assembly without a government in place, the country will be in a very weak position. Pouille warned the USG and EU against making negative comments about March 8 because it could strengthen the party by being twisted to accuse March 14 of being a puppet of the west. He said France seeks to keep the situation stable in Lebanon and discourage any foreign or regional influence there -- especially from Iran because the nuclear issue was set to escalate again. Pouille added that Syria has been helpful with Lebanon and the Syrians told the GOF they were comfortable with Saad Hariri as Prime Minister.

He added that Syria trusts Sleiman and the Syrians are "not uneasy" with the current political situation in Lebanon.

PEACE PROCESS

14. (C) Pouille described France as the only EU member actively pursuing peace in the Middle East and he said the Quartet Group is not effective because it only issues one statement every three months. By contrast, the GOF wants to add four new points the Quartet's established three goals: 1) Hamas must accept a cease fire, 2) Palestinian Authority President Abbas is the sole negotiator for the Palestinians, 3) any peace agreement must be voted on in a referendum, and 4) the Palestinians must have a unified security service. Despite the fact that these points made greater demands on Hamas than on Fatah, Pouille argued that Hamas has political legitimacy. Upon questioning, he said the rest of the EU had not (yet) concurred with the four new points. Pouille said the Israeli-Palestinian peace process requires proper timing,

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sequence and priorities to be successful and the GOF would like ideas on this from the USG -- hopefully at the G-20 meeting in September. Regarding coordination, he said the GOF would like to meet with Special Envoy George Mitchell in Paris, have FM Kouchner visit Washington and have lower level meetings as well. He said Egypt was the key to getting the peace process reinvigorated and that later Syria could play an important role. He also added that the U.S., France and Egypt would need to be the drivers of the process, followed by the Quartet, the Arab League and finally international donors.

RIVKIN